

not in this dark alone by rosekings

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Summary:

“If we make it out of this,” Dustin whispers, “remind me to go to some therapy.”

A breathy noise comes from Lucas, something like a restrained laugh. “We’re gonna make it out of this.”

Dustin’s stomach twists. If he didn’t know Lucas inside and out, he would’ve missed the thinly-veiled terror in his voice.

not in this dark alone

It's when Dustin's fingers graze the cold metal of the crowbar that he's struck with the reality of what he and Lucas are about to do. It's the most dangerous and unpredictable plan they've ever thought of, but with everyone spread out across town fighting their own battles and El unavailable, it's the only one they've got. A million panicked thoughts race through his head all at once, and it's the worst ones that ring the loudest.

What if Lucas gets hurt?

What if it's worse than that?

He looks up and meets Lucas' eyes in the glow of the flashlight. "You should go back."

Lucas looks at him in bewilderment "Go *back*? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Back to El and the others, where it's safe."

"Dustin, there's *nowhere* safe anymore. In case you don't remember, El isn't *conscious* right now, and there's no way I'm letting you do this on your own."

Dustin briefly squeezes his eyes shut. *Does he not realize there's a human-killing monster in here?* "If you get hurt -"

Lucas shakes his head firmly. "*If* I do, it isn't your fault. I'm going with you, Dustin, and you can't stop me."

Dustin chews his lip, staring at the unflinching resolve in Lucas' eyes. He knows he should protest more, but goddammit, he wants his best friend with him.

"Don't say I didn't try," he says shakily, swallowing back the lump of fear in his throat. Lucas nods.

"Let's just get this over with."

Just get it over with. Blowing out a breath, Dustin shines his flashlight on the six-pack of beer bottles at their feet, each one filled halfway with gasoline and stuffed with a shred of t-shirt. Next to those are two silver propane tanks and a crowbar.

“I’ll go through and then you can hand all this to me.” He hesitates. “We can’t carry the flashlight with this.”

Lucas looks at the light warily. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to have it on in there anyways.”

He’s right, as usual. God forbid they let the *thing* know they’re there before they have to.

Dustin turns back to the shattered window of the grocery store. It’s pitch-black inside, as is everything else tonight, but in the slim beam of the flashlight he can see a trail of dark purple slime winding across the tile.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yeah. I’m right behind you.”

Dustin clicks the light off and drops it in the grass.

Just do it. It won’t take long. You’ll be in and out in two minutes, and you’ve got Lucas with you, so really it’ll be easier than that time in the tunnels -

With a deep breath, he pulls himself through the window.

He hops down as lightly as he can. Lucas quickly passes him their supplies and then he’s through too, and for a moment they stand in silence, ears straining and eyes adjusting. There’s absolutely no sound apart from their own breathing, which Dustin’s fear-coursing nerves immediately decide is even more terrifying than if they’d been standing inside a nuclear explosion.

Still worse is that he can’t hear the monster. But it’s there with them; it has to be. The slime went straight through the front door and didn’t come back out. Unless it broke out the back. *If it did*, he thinks, *that’s a whole other set of life-or-death problems.*

Once he can make out the shadows and shapes of the store, he picks up the Molotov cocktails and the crowbar, leaving the two propane tanks to Lucas. He forces himself to step forward. Another step, then two, three, four. *Maybe it's invisible.* Every movement is agonizingly slow, seemingly thunderous, and it takes an impossibly long time to reach the end of the aisle.

He exhales as quietly as possible, pressing his back to the now-empty shelf. He thinks it held cereal before. The things have been eating everything they can get their hands - *hands?* - on, including humans.

Frosted Flakes must be the next best thing, he thinks grimly.

He can just see Lucas' outline next to him but the heart slamming against his ribcage demands confirmation.

"Lucas?"

It's barely audible to his own ears but in this black hole, it's enough. A warm shoulder presses against his, definitely human and definitely his best friend.

Too often he's kept awake at night by the thought of all the narrow slips they've had, the close calls and lucky misses. Either of them could've been dead three, four years ago, but here they are, five months away from graduation and still kicking.

What if this is it? What if our luck is out?

"Do you hear it?" Lucas whispers, pulling Dustin from his unhelpfully anxious thoughts.

"Not yet."

"Are you sure it's in here?"

He swallows, his nails digging into his palm around the cardboard handle of the bottle carrier. The crowbar he holds doesn't seem like much defense against this dark.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

He's sure because he can taste it. The monsters pollute the air with a carnal, paralyzing fear, and he can taste its metallic toxin on his tongue.

He can't quite come to terms with the whole situation yet. There's a monster somewhere inside his fucking *grocery store*. The grocery store with the cool gumball machine that he loved as a kid. Monsters used to only exist inside Dungeons & Dragons and yet over the last five years, he's seen more than his fantasy-loving thirteen-year-old self ever wished he would.

He thinks of the flyers crammed into the desk drawer he never opens: a dozen of them, bright blue and advertising the school counselor in block letters. His mom started not-so-subtly dropping hints a couple years ago, after his English teacher called her about the panic attack Dustin had in the middle of class.

She can't know; she wouldn't be able to handle it. But it isn't *his* fault he gets four hours of sleep at best and has an ever-present fear of what lurks in the shadows.

"If we make it out of this," he whispers, "remind me to go to some therapy."

A breathy noise comes from Lucas, something like a restrained laugh. "We're gonna make it out of this."

Dustin's stomach twists. If he didn't know Lucas inside and out, he would've missed the thinly-veiled terror in his voice. The doubt.

He knows they need to move. Their job right now is to kill the monster that they hope is the 'pack leader,' and they've discovered that fire is second-best when El isn't around.

"Where do you think it is?" he asks. Lucas takes a moment before responding.

"It's probably in the butcher's section, right? They have whole walk-in fridge of frozen stuff, and...it isn't that far from us. The monster should still be there. It can't have eaten everything yet."

Dustin doesn't argue, just adjusts his grip on the crowbar and focuses

on his breathing. He misses the nail-bat. It splintered and shattered just a few hours ago, when Nancy wielded it with all her rage and barely won her fight against the bruise-colored monster. They still aren't even sure if she'll be okay, and he feels like the bat's demise was the first sign of the end times.

Lucas' breath goes in and out several times before he speaks again. "Dustin?"

Dustin swallows. "Yeah. Let's go."

It'll all be over soon.

He turns the corner with his breath caught in his throat.

There's nothing there, nothing right in front of them ready to devour them whole, and he only allows himself two seconds to recompose before moving on.

As they creep slowly and steadily towards the back of the store, glancing down each aisle to make sure they're not being stalked, the lack of sound crawls up and down his skin. He thinks about how he never understood the term *the silence is deafening* until now, and he can't decide if his ears are hypersensitive or numb. Maybe both at once.

When the familiar outlines of the butcher's corner come into view, all he sees at first is the glass cases full of meats and the small space behind. But then his eyes latch onto something else there, something entirely out of place, and his feet freeze in time with his heart.

Lucas bumps into his back. "What?"

He stares at the meat section just six or seven aisles ahead of them, his eyes straining. *There* - he sees it before he hears it. First it's the moving shadows, too smooth and abnormally shaped to be human. Big enough to end them both in two lethal swings. Then the noises reach him. The tinkling of broken glass, a sharp tearing sound followed by a sickening chewing.

Dustin's stomach lurches and by the choked noise Lucas makes, he knows he sees it too.

“Oh god, move, move, move, *move* -”

He shoves Lucas sideways and they slip into the nearest aisle, narrowly avoiding clanking all the glass and metal they’re carrying together.

“Shitshitshitshitfuck,” Lucas hisses in one shallow breath. “Did it see us?”

Dustin shakes his head, his mouth stuffed with cotton as he tries to get himself off the ledge of hyperventilation. *This isn’t the first monster you’ve ever seen. This isn’t the worst thing you’ve been through. Get your shit together. It’s not the end. You won’t die today. You won’t die today. You won’t die today. You won’t die today.*

A long minute later, when his heart rate is manageable, he registers the soft, quick breaths of Lucas next to him and the revolting sounds of the monster. It isn’t onto them, yet.

“Fuck,” he finally breathes. He nudges Lucas. “Can you look around the corner?”

“Oh - yeah -”

Lucas slowly leans forward, tipping his head around the corner of the aisle. After a few moments they hear the sweep and clunk of a heavy door opening and closing, and Lucas turns around.

“It moved to the freezer room. If we’re going to do this it needs to be now.”

Dustin nods, setting the beer bottles down as quietly as possible and taking a propane tank from Lucas. “I’ll lead.”

“Right behind you.”

An errant thought catches on the branches of Dustin’s mind: that this is how it’s always been. With he and Lucas, it’s never a competition to be the leader. They both know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and next moves, so they stand back-to-back in the hellfire. Dustin doesn’t think anybody knows him quite as intricately as Lucas.

What if this is it?

He hesitates. "Lucas..."

"I know."

Dustin nods. Of course Lucas knows. He probably knew before Dustin even said anything because that's just how it is, how they are.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

The time for stalling and sappy last words is over. Dustin peeks around the corner to confirm that the monster is still in the freezer and then they're moving.

They crouch low to the ground, going swiftly and quietly. Upon reaching the swinging half-door that lets them behind the counter, Dustin glances back to make sure Lucas is still there.

He is.

Dustin pushes through the door, wincing at the creak it makes, and it swings shut once Lucas is inside. Situated in a corner of the store and bordered by one long counter interspersed with glass display cases, the space isn't at all big, mainly dominated by an island in the middle for cutting up portions of meat for customers. Their target - or their demise; Dustin isn't going to pretend they're the stronger predator - is still in the walk-in freezer room, as evidenced by the disgusting chewing and tearing sounds coming from behind the heavy metal door set in the wall.

It strikes him again that it's still so, so dark. The way the monster has stolen all the light from the building is unnatural, entirely of a different world.

A shiver rolls down his spine. *Not a world I wanna visit. How does El bear it?*

"One in the corner over there and one in the corner by the door," he whispers, pointing even though he can barely see his own hand.

Lucas separates from him to take the door, hunch-creeping left around the island and out of sight. Dustin tamps down the instinctive rush of anxiety at being separated and moves right, to the far corner. The propane tank makes a tiny metallic clang when he sets it down and he hopes the monster is too busy chowing to hear it. He reluctantly puts the crowbar aside so he can twist the valve on the tank around and around and around, until the air is filled with a faint hissing and the thick scent of gas.

God, he's so glad he paid attention in all of his chemistry classes.

A whisper comes from the dark. "Dustin?"

He gets to his feet and sees Lucas already up, standing on the other side of the island. "Good here," he says. "You?"

Lucas nods. "Yeah, let's -"

He falters, his posture spelling confusion. Dustin stares at the glint of his eyes as his heartbeat starts climbing again.

"What?" he whispers. The toxicity of the propane is impossible to ignore; the hissing fills his ears and the odor swirls around them and he knows they can't stay there much longer.

Lucas shakes his head and lifts a hand in a *wait, listen* gesture. Dustin does, both of them frozen to the spot for several long moments.

Then it clicks. They're not listening for noise, but for a *lack* of noise. And all Dustin can hear is the hissing tanks and his own deep breathing.

Shit.

They realize it at the same time and as Lucas instinctively turns around to look at the metal door to the freezer room behind him, a lead weight drops into Dustin's stomach.

"Wait, Lucas, don't -"

He never gets to finish. The door slams open in a crash so loud compared to the silence they've been submerged in that Dustin

swears his eardrums burst. Everything next happens lightning-fast and in slow-motion all at once - he sees Lucas fall onto the tile as the door is ripped off its hinges, he sees the *thing* taking up the entire threshold, its slimy black and purple mass practically spilling out of it, and he thinks it looks like a demented spider when he sees the legs growing out of its back, ink-black and smooth as obsidian with each point filed lethally sharp. He sees one of the legs raise into the air in preparation to strike the nearest target, and down down down it goes, and then he sees it heading towards Lucas' shoulder.

Urgency cracks through him like a whip. A scream rips out of his throat, Lucas' name maybe, and he finally snaps out of it and throws himself on top of the counter. He swings the crowbar in the direction of the monster's head in a blow of rage just as its leg pierces Lucas' shoulder. Lucas and the monster roar at the same time, and the shock of the hit is just enough to make it stutter and withdraw its leg from Lucas. Dustin scrambles down to the floor, flailing to haul Lucas to his feet. They stumble backwards as the monster starts advancing, looming over them with such a terrifying immensity that Dustin wonders if he's going to pass out. He can't even tell where *it* ends and the blackness around them begins. Its multiple sharpened legs click on the tile like fingernails and it squelches as it goes, dripping some godawful substance, and everything reeks of gas and raw meat and Dustin's insides roil like a vat.

He hits the outer counter and Lucas slams into him, the back of his shirt wrapped up tight in Dustin's fists.

The plan, the plan, the plan. "Lucas! We have to -"

"I know!"

"Before it moves -"

"*I know!*"

The monster is on them again, snarling, three deadly appendages poised to attack again. *Lucaslucaslucas* flashes through Dustin's head and he releases his friend, shoving him hard to the side and out of the way.

“Dustin!”

Dustin whacks the crowbar at the monster again, fending off one of the legs. Adrenaline runs hot and fast through him, forcing his mind to prioritize despite how scattered and terrified he feels.

“Get the bottles - *Lucas! Get the bottles!*”

“But -“

“*Just get them!*”

Somewhere above the blood rushing in his ears he hears Lucas hauling ass out of the butcher’s section and back to the aisle where they left their Molotov cocktails. They can’t let this thing leave this corner of the store - more specifically, the area covered by the leaking propane. Otherwise, they’re risking their lives for nothing, and Dustin would *really* rather that not happen.

He refocuses on the monster and swings again. Iron connects with otherworldly flesh in a sickening thump and the thing lets out something akin to a screech, recoiling just two or three feet. Dustin only manages one more hit before it recovers and lunges forward. He ducks sideways but he isn’t quick enough - it catches his arm, tearing through fabric and skin and sliding all the way from the crook of his elbow to his wrist. He chokes, nearly dropping the crowbar as he staggers backwards against the wall. A searing rush of pain flashes through him and renders him useless, until he notices the monster approaching him again and his body forces him to keep going.

“Any fucking time now, Lucas!” he half yells, half gasps as he switches hands on the crowbar. He drives forward again, relentless in his swings, but his brain is screaming how futile it is at him: the thing has too much stamina, too much evil, not enough humanity in it to break down anytime soon. Fragile-boned and fragile-minded Dustin is no match for it.

I can try, he thinks, grinding his teeth. He presses forward and matches the roars of the monster with his own.

Nobody looks at him as a fighter or a warrior. They look to Lucas

first, the one with common sense and logical solutions and the ability to prioritize. But Dustin has always been intelligent and an instinct-first person, ready to do whatever his gut tells him when it comes to his friends. If he can't save them from the lion's den, he'll be damned if he isn't jumping in with them.

He thinks that makes him just as formidable as Lucas, and that's probably why they always work well together.

Please don't let me lose him tonight.

He's in the middle of ducking under the monster's arm and slamming the crowbar into its back when he hears Lucas. His eyes have to double-take and readjust when he glances over the counter because now, there's light: Lucas is silhouetted by the orange flame of a lighter held in his hand. *Finally.*

"Get out of there!" he yells.

Dustin narrowly dodges another stab from the monster, lungs burning from inhaling too much gas and fighting too long, and he makes a break for it, launching himself across the counter. As soon as he's clear Lucas lights one of the cocktails and hurls it in the monster's direction.

He doesn't see the impact but the rest of his senses more than make up for it. The air goes up in flames, the reaction of the fire and gasoline contained in the bottles catching on the concentration of airborne propane. A rush of heat floods over him as he stumbles back to Lucas and the monster starts screaming.

He only turns once he reaches Lucas' side, panting. The sight is damn near blinding; the dark purple monster thrashes and burns and screeches, flashing in and out of their view amidst the flames enveloping it.

"All of them, come on," Lucas says breathlessly, passing another bottle to Dustin. Dustin holds it to the lighter and then throws it as far away as possible the moment the strip of fabric catches, wincing at the sharp radiation of pain down his arm. It's somewhat exhilarating to watch the glass shatter and the air ignite. Were they

not in mortal danger, Dustin thinks both of them would really enjoy it. He'd suggest the idea in an abandoned warehouse at the edge of town and Lucas would protest, saying *that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard Dustin all your ideas are so reckless you'll get us both killed* and Dustin would grin and Lucas would go along anyways, secretly having fun the whole glorious, spectacular time.

I want to live to have more of those days.

They light and fling one cocktail after the other, successfully keeping the monster trapped and hopefully ebbing away its life. The fire has started catching on the rest of the store, and once their last bottle is thrown, Dustin squints into the massive burning fray.

"What if this isn't enough to -"

He's cut off by a high-pitched ringing, the kind that rushes into your ears and nearly blacks you out when you stand up too fast, the pitch multiplied by about a thousand. He and Lucas instinctively double over and clap their hands over their ears, everything they hold clattering to the ground.

"What the fuck is that?" he yells. Lucas shakes his head, looking up at the inferno holding the monster.

"I think it's calling for help!" he shouts. Dustin feels his mouth fall open.

"Can it do that?"

Lucas gives him the most incredulous look in existence. "How should I know what the hell this thing can do? Let's just get out of here!"

Dustin doesn't need to be told twice. What they've done *has* to be enough to incapacitate this thing, and if it isn't, hopefully El will be awake by the time it comes raging after them. Dropping his hands from his ears despite the monster's scream still going strong, he swipes up the crowbar and instinctively reaches over to make sure Lucas is moving with him.

He is.

He looks weak as hell, though, way worse than when they started this. His arm is shaking under Dustin's hand and his breathing is definitely too shallow.

"Buddy, you good?"

Lucas nods, shaking Dustin's hand off. "Let's go."

He's fine, Dustin thinks. He isn't feeling too hot himself either, but that's gotta be normal. Shaking is *normal* after something like this. He sets the worry aside and together they sprint for the front doors, leaving the wail of the monster and their crimes of arson behind.

The chill of the night is a shocking relief compared to the heat inside. They emerge onto the empty road lit by pale streetlights and waste no time in putting some distance between the monster and themselves. When they've crossed the street and gone several buildings down, they pause for a moment, turning around to look at the inferno. Half of the store is consumed already; the bright orange flames flicker up into the night sky, sending off sparks. There won't be any firefighters tonight, though. The entirety of Hawkins was evacuated this morning.

"That's insane," Lucas says, slack-jawed.

"Do you think it worked?" Dustin asks. "You think the monster'll die after all that?"

Lucas doesn't answer, whether out of awe or uncertainty Dustin isn't sure. As they watch, a portion of the stores erupts in an explosion, debris flying everywhere.

"What the hell was that?"

Dustin taps his finger on the crowbar contemplatively. "That'd be the rest of the propane inside the tanks finally reaching boiling point."

Lucas gapes at him. "Shit, Dustin."

"I know, I know, you can thank my scientific prowess later."

He almost smiles then, his panic easing now they're both out of there,

but then Lucas stumbles in place just a fraction. A wince crosses his face and he reaches up to touch the monster-inflicted wound in his shoulder.

Dustin's stomach turns over. "Lucas?"

Lucas looks confusedly at his hand. In the streetlight, they can both see the blood smeared on his fingers and how *wrong* it is. Too thick and not red enough. It's the color of a bruise.

"I think it's poison," he says, fear swimming in his voice.

No, no, no, no. Panic runs up Dustin's spine like a lightning bolt. "That's - no, it can't be. It's not."

Lucas grabs Dustin's injured arm, pulling aside shredded cloth and holding it up to the light. Though the long wound is definitely shallower and less severe than Lucas', it's seeping the same molasses-like blood and the veins and arteries around it are prominent and dark purple. And it *burns*, more than a normal cut should.

Dustin swallows. He can taste that metallic paralyzing fear on his tongue again. "Okay. Maybe it's something bad. Maybe."

Now that he's aware of the problem and not completely focused on a monster waiting to tear him apart, his brain immediately identifies everything that isn't right: his numb fingertips, the sudden brittleness of his legs, the way he's shaking and the way his chest seems to be closing up more and more every second. *Poison.*

And then the anxiety starts setting in quicker. It winds under his skin and streaks up and down his nerves, slowly decimating his will to stay calm piece by piece.

Oh my god, we're fucking dying.

"What do we do?" he asks Lucas. He tries to keep the desperation down, he really does, but the terror on his friend's face isn't helping. Lucas' eyes are wide and almost bloodshot, his shoulder coated in dark purple, and he shakes his head helplessly.

"I don't know - I don't know, Dustin...I have no idea what this stuff is

or what it does, or...god, it *hurts...*”

It must really be the end times if neither of them have a plan, not even a half-assed one.

Lucas trails off, eyebrows furrowing as he looks down the street past the burning grocery store. “What is that?”

Dustin follows his line of sight to the far end of the road lit by the dim streetlamps. Dozens of figures are emerging over the crest and it’s immediately evident they aren’t human. Black and abnormally shaped, moving fast on what appears to be all fours, they’re almost a direct copy of their leader. They emanate hostility and malevolence even from far away, the distance closing rapidly.

Just as Dustin opens his mouth, a roar bursts from the grocery store and their eyes snap over to see the monster crawling out of the fiery wreckage, all of its limbs and appendages still intact despite the horrid burns across its flesh and the earlier explosion.

“It was calling for help,” Lucas says faintly, his voice stolen by both fear and poison. Dustin blanches, the crowbar heavy in his hand. *Please don’t let me lose him tonight.*

“Okay, we need to go - Lucas, we need to go, right the fuck now -”

Instead of immediately breaking into a run, Lucas stumbles again. The poison already has hold of him, working faster the more his pulse ratchets up. Tendrils of fear close around Dustin’s heart, and he grabs Lucas’ forearm.

“Just hold on, okay? The library isn’t far.”

Lucas wheezes, managing to nod and straighten up. “Okay.”

They move forward, sprinting and stumbling and terror pooling in each one of the footsteps they leave behind. Dustin’s arm burns, his head spins, his chest needs more space to breathe, he knows that running will only make the spread of the poison worse. He doesn’t have a choice anymore, though; Lucas needs to get to safety.

The monsters are closing on them, now joined by their leader. Their

howls, filled with bloodlust and malice, echo into the deep night and get ricocheted towards Dustin and Lucas by the buildings. *Not tonight, not tonight, not tonight, not tonight.*

They make it up a set of concrete steps and finally get to the front of the library. By sheer luck that Dustin thinks they damn well need, the doors aren't locked, and he pushes straight inside and drags Lucas with him. He slams the doors shut behind them and not two seconds after he locks them comes the sound of rushing monsters hitting the wood, over and over and over in an attempt to break through.

If he and Lucas had been two seconds too slow, they'd be dead on the steps.

He shoves a nearby desk against the doors, fully aware it won't do much good, if any at all, and then they move deeper into the pitch-black library.

Lucas collapses against a bookshelf once they reach the very back of the building. Dustin falls to his knees, both of them exhausted and dizzy. It's the poison's doing, he knows. He shifts to hover in front of Lucas, sheltering him from the harsh, unforgiving world around them.

"Lucas, look at me."

Lucas' head tips back against the shelf and his weary eyes find Dustin's. "I feel like shit," he rasps.

The laugh that Dustin wants to give never comes. "Yeah, you look it, buddy. I just need you to hold on for me, okay? We'll get out of here soon, or someone will come help, or *something*."

"You need to -" Lucas is interrupted by a cough and Dustin puts a hand on his good shoulder to try and...steady him? Reassure him? "You need to stop the bleeding."

"Oh shit, yeah, here -"

He shrugs off his coat and carefully wraps it around Lucas' shoulder, tying the sleeves in a tight knot. "There. Bleeding stopped. Well, slowed, I guess."

“What about you?”

Dustin doesn't even bother to look at his own arm. He can feel the poison inside his blood, working and draining him but doing it much more slowly than it did to Lucas. “It's not bleeding anymore.”

“Yeah but you're still -” Lucas breaks off in another hacking cough but when he recovers, he doesn't finish his sentence. They both hear the dropped word all the same. *Dying*.

Weaving through the bookshelves is the sound of the monsters relentlessly hurling themselves into the front doors. Dustin winces every time the ground shudders. It won't be long before they realize the windows are glass, and then what?

Not tonight, not tonight, not tonight.

“Dustin.”

Dustin's gaze drifts back to Lucas. “Yeah?”

Lucas' chest rises and falls much too quickly and he looks up helplessly. “You should - you should go.”

It isn't even that much of a shock, and the irony isn't lost on Dustin. There's no hesitation in his answer; there never could be, not in a million years. “Fuck that. No way. God, why would you even think I'd do that?”

Lucas sighs, but it rattles on its way out and ends up being the beginnings of a sob. It's a bruising sucker-punch right to Dustin's heart, especially since Lucas is rarely so vulnerable.

“I don't want to die yet, Dustin. We're graduating soon, and...” He draws a thin, shaky breath. “I'm so, so scared - I'm not ready, I'm not _.”

“Stop *saying* that,” Dustin says, his own voice wavering. He fumbles for Lucas' hand, lacing their fingers together tightly. “You're not *dying*, okay? Nobody's dying tonight. We're getting out of here.”

Lucas doesn't answer. Dustin knows what he wants to say - they're

surrounded, all their friends are scattered in the wind, both of them are being picked apart from the inside out. Their odds are none. They've rolled a critical miss on their survival check.

God, he's scared too. He and Lucas had plans to go on a road trip with the rest of the party after graduation. He was going to apply for a fancy science college just for the hell of it and maybe they'd accept him. He has a mom and a cat and friends that are waiting on him, them, to get back alive. His body is shaking, his head is swimming in fog. He's never been more terrified of *after*. He always thought that when the time came he'd be ready for it, but right now death is at the front door, tangible and aching for him, and he wants to run away as fast and as far as his feet will carry him.

The monsters smash against the doors again and again and again. Dustin hears wood splintering, sharp claws scratching at the brick walls. He feels warm tears track down his cheeks, absent of any cries since he doesn't have the breath left for it, and he looks at Lucas, whose breathing has faded to nearly nothing.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. Lucas shakes his head, and right there in his eyes is everything: all the words they've said to each other, all the words they haven't, all the words they want to. The memories and the ones yet to be. The joy and the anger and the laughter and the sorrow and the highs and the lows. His best friend.

Lucas lets his eyes flicker shut.

It's so unfair that they've run out of time.

Dustin closes his eyes, too.

Maybe their friends will get to them in time.

Maybe not.

Lucas' hand squeezes his like a lifeline.

And the doors cave in.

Author's Note:

idk what my deal is with the angst lately but here it is. thanks for reading and for all your kudos and comments! come hit me up on tumblr, dustinhendrsn